

Divorce and Remarriage

In writing on divorce and remarriage, we understand that we are approaching a topic both sensitive and important. It is sensitive because it is such a personal subject. There is hardly a person alive today that has not been touched in some way by the pain of the disintegration of the covenant of marriage. In the wake of divorce, many struggle with guilt, condemnation, shame and questions regarding what could have been different. Some end up feeling stuck in a state of singleness that was the result of a divorce, rather than the result of a decision made for the Kingdom of God. Beyond that, others have fought hard to avoid divorce, only to end up feeling stuck in marriages that are a far cry from God's intention. In such situations, staying in the marriage can feel more painful and difficult than being alone. For these reasons and many more, we do not approach this subject lightly.

However, marriage is important because it is significant to God. The creation of marriage is so foundational to God's purpose that it was a central part of the original creation process (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:18-25). Far from being an addition years later, it was core to the original mandate given to humanity (Gen. 1:28). In addition, the Bible consistently speaks of marriage as representing the relationship between God and His people. Paul crowns it with just such lofty purpose stating that it representing Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:32). While not being eternal or even the best state for all, there is still no doubt that marriage is a unique relational reality in God's design. The importance of marriage in God's design compels us to address these issues within a society in which marriage is often trivialized and divorce is exceedingly commonplace.

COVENANT OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is important to God because it is a covenant. Covenant lies at the heart of who God is. He exists as a covenantal being, a trinity of 3 distinct persons who are one being. God does not just make covenants; He is a covenant (Is. 42:6-8). Thus, when God created, He established covenant at the heart of creation. The very fabric of the universe is held together by His covenantal commitment to His Word (Is. 55:11; Heb. 1:3). Covenant describes how God relates to us as well as how He calls us to relate to one another. Therefore, covenant is a paradigm that must be central to our thinking as we approach this issue.

Though marriage is legally binding, it is not at heart a law so much as it is a covenant. In other words, what is at stake here is not the keeping of a law but the working out of covenant. This is important for us to understand because we live in a time, at least in the West, where thinking in terms of covenant is abandoned. On the one hand, we only consider the law with its enforcement and loopholes. On the other, we abandon the law for a grace that is really license. This debate between law and license is not the mentality that lies at the heart of the Biblical discussion. We will struggle to understand the Scripture if we approach it with this type of legal mindset.

Words, therefore, are central to the expression of His government. Rejection of His words is tantamount to rejection of Him and rebellion against His authority. It is in this sense that Scripture functions as authoritative in the life of the Church.

The Biblical approach to marriage, divorce and remarriage is determined by the state of the covenant. Are we living faithfully in the covenant? At what point is covenant made? Under what conditions is the covenant actually broken in the eyes of God? We must remember that there is an important difference between being unfaithful to the covenant and the covenant actually being broken. Any type of sin is unfaithfulness, but covenant is stronger than the sin. However, some sin is an actual breaking of covenant effectually dissolving it. Therefore, the Bible concerns itself not so much with the question of, “Can a Christian divorce?” But rather, “Is the covenant broken or still in place?”

From Genesis onward, we understand that marriage is to be lifelong. Any dissolution of marriage must be a radical breach of the divine institution. It could not occur without a rupturing of the human-divine relationship first. Indeed, that is what happened leading to the entrance of sin and all of the devastation that is its fruit.

At the same time, we recognize that while the reason for divorce may be sinful the permission to divorce may actually be God-given. This is not to say that divorce is part of God’s plan and intention. It is to say that there are situations when it is tolerated and valid. What leads to divorce is sin and evil. However, God provides mercy and grace within the aftermath of sin.

We will proceed by laying out the Old Testament background leading to the debates of Jesus’ day regarding divorce and remarriage. With that context in mind, we will look at each New Testament passage that directly addresses divorce and remarriage trying to interpret what it is intended to communicate in its original setting, rather than forcing the passages to answer the questions that we may currently have. We will examine the passages individually attempting to hear the notes of truth that each of them is contributing to the scriptural teaching on marriage and divorce. Then, we will harmonize all of the passages in coming to some conclusions on the biblical practices of divorce and remarriage. We will attempt to bring all of their teachings together in application and in answer to many of the questions and issues that we face.

By the end, we will attempt to establish several categories of understanding:

1. We will discover when the Bible allows for a valid divorce. By that phrase, we mean a divorce that is the result of the dissolution or breaking of the covenant resulting in a divinely authorized freedom to remarry.
2. We will observe where the Bible may concede divorce but restrict remarriage. In such cases, the individual is instructed to remain single or reconcile.
3. We will see when divorce is not encouraged or allowed.
4. We will briefly consider those areas that are not clearly addressed in Scripture and are left to the conscience and discernment of those involved.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

During Jesus’ time, considerable arguments were occurring over the Old Testament’s teaching on the issues of marriage, divorce and remarriage. In particular, the debates focused on the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4.!

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and ends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.”

To begin, it is helpful to point out that the goal of this instruction was mainly to prevent a husband from remarrying a wife he had divorced, if she had subsequently remarried. He is not laying down a universal principle of divorce but dealing with an individual application due to a specific problem that might arise.

Further, the passage does not sanction or legitimize the original reason for divorce on the husband's side. There is nothing here to indicate that the divorce was a valid dissolving of covenant. The passage merely is setting up a scenario that may exist (i.e., if a man gives his wife a certificate of divorce), and then determines how to deal with the situation now that one is in it. As we will shortly see, Jesus will answer the question of the legitimacy of the original divorce.

Additionally, the instruction seems more concerned with the protection of the wife. The reason for divorce, as we will discuss below, seems clearly to be less than adultery. The fact that the woman is not considered adulterous is seen by the lack of any punishment for sin but rather freedom to remarry. The husband who may feel he has cause for the divorce must still give her a certificate of divorce. This bill of divorce allowed her to remarry and most likely allowed her to keep her marital inheritance that is lost in the case of adultery.

What proved most problematic about this passage was the cause of divorce. All that was needed for this certificate to be issued was that the husband "found some indecency in her". In Jesus' day, this statement, "some indecency" was subject to no small debate as a rather mysterious reason for divorce.

Previously, most Jewish teachers argued that it is not likely that this phrase refers to adultery in the strictest sense of the term. Moses could have simply used that more specific word. Additionally, most cases involving adultery were already covered in the Law. The penalty for adultery was already clarified in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:23-27. The penalty for adultery was death which makes divorce irrelevant.

Suspected adultery is discussed in Numbers 5:11-31. A charge against a newlywed suspected of not being a virgin is clarified in Deuteronomy 22:13-21. As well, Deuteronomy 22 deals with a charge of sexual unfaithfulness in engagement, the victim of rape, and pre-marital sex.

This term indecency is not found in any of these adultery passages. Further, these instructions closely follow the already clear commands about adultery and are presented as a different case. Since the word was also used for nakedness, the closest the Jewish interpreters could come to some sense of definition was that the term must be associated with sexual indecency or ritual uncleanness.

As a result, two dominant interpretations emerged as an explanation of this passage. First, this is some sort of unfaithfulness short of intercourse effectually allowing for two levels of adultery. Second, this passage allows a husband who cares for an adulterous wife to choose not to prosecute her for the unfaithfulness which would end in stoning. Rather, he can show compassion by just divorcing her. However, the phrase remained without clear definition. The actual meaning of the passage came into stronger debate during the time of Jesus.

A rabbi called Hillel emerged with a new interpretation of Deuteronomy 24 sparking a heated controversy. He pointed out that the passage refers to a "cause" of sexual immorality (translated above as "some"). Why say a "cause of sexual immorality" rather than just "sexual immorality"? This word cause must refer to a broader and different ground for divorce than just the action of sexual immorality. This different ground is simply "a cause" and could, therefore, be any cause. Similar to a no-fault divorce, this allowed a husband to divorce for any cause (e.g., not having enough sex, a wife's nagging, letting down her hair in public, finding someone better looking or even something as simple as burning a meal). This new interpretation was called "any cause" divorce and proved very popular with the common people. The husband was free to divorce while the wife was protected by the certificate. In many cases, both sides

were happy to walk away. However, it was strongly opposed by a rabbi named Shammai and his disciples. They maintained the more traditional interpretation of some form of actual sexual immorality. This debate formed the setting for Jesus' instructions on marriage and divorce. He is speaking into these interpretations to clarify what Moses' words actually meant. He is addressing the practices of divorce resulting from the debated interpretations of Deuteronomy 24 and the conditions of giving a certificate of divorce.

MATTHEW 5:31-32

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

This instruction from Jesus comes in his seminal Sermon on the Mount. During this section, He is establishing the relationship of His teaching to the Old Testament Law. He begins by clearly declaring that the message He is bringing does not differ with the Old Testament but rather interprets and accomplishes the Law.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” **Matthew 5:17-20**

Jesus was not criticizing the Old Testament but rather criticizing the way many interpreted it and failed to live up to it. He is rescuing the Law from its perversions and distortions at the hands of the pharisaical and rabbinical traditions. He is stating that the true intention of the Law is for it to be established both in action and in the heart. Jesus' teaching was intended to cause God's commands to shine with a piercing clarity, cutting through the fog of confusion created by all the rabbinical debate of His day, and displaying God's intention in the Old Testament command.

In verses 31-32, Jesus turns His focus to the Law and its teachings on divorce quoting from Deuteronomy 24 and addressing the debates of His day. To begin, Jesus makes it explicitly clear that Moses, and ultimately God, was not allowing a husband to give a certificate of divorce for “any cause”. He clarifies adultery as the single cause of valid divorce in Deuteronomy. The weight of His statement is not where we normally put it. He is not so much emphasizing that you can divorce for adultery as much as He is declaring that no other cause is legitimate.

Any tolerance supposedly intimated in Deuteronomy 24 is overturned by Jesus' clear declaration. Divorce for any other cause is not valid; it does not nullify the marriage covenant. While a legal divorce may be given, the covenant remains in place in the eyes of God. Hence, a remarriage is considered adultery. Presumably, this would hold if the husband remarried as well. Further, Jesus views the divorce from the wrong done to the victim, in this case, the woman. The man who divorces for any other reason causes her to commit adultery. The action is wrong because it harms an innocent party. Obviously, the divorce alone does not do this. He is picturing the situation from the results of the divorce with the implication being that she will remarry (most likely due to station, finances, children, etc.). She is forced into this situation.

Next, what is often missed is the mercy in this command. Jesus declares that divorce is now an adequate response to adultery. Death and stoning, as commanded by the Law, are not needed. In addition, Jesus does not say the husband must divorce. He only guards the freedom to do so. Also, we must recognize that Jesus says nothing of remarriage for adultery in this passage. While possibly implied, any explicit permission must be found in other places.

Finally, we want to look briefly at the term Jesus uses for adultery, *pornea*. This word is a general term that includes adultery, incest, pre-marital sex, prostitution, etc. It typically involves physical sexual engagement with another. It is a different word than that used for lust which occurs a few verses earlier when Jesus speaks of adultery in the heart. *Pornea* is not primarily mental and inward, though that is a serious sin in itself that must be violently repented of as Jesus states. This seems to be actual physical adultery.

Certainly, this includes any kind of physical intercourse. However, the question is raised whether this could refer to physical contact that is less than actual intercourse. Clearly, such action is unfaithfulness, but is it adultery in the way Jesus uses the term? The only answer to that is that we can not be certain. In such cases, we leave it to the wisdom of the elders involved to handle such situations with the kindness and severity of God under the direction of the Holy Spirit, as well as the faith of the spouse who has suffered the unfaithfulness.

MATTHEW 19:3-12

”And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?’ He answered, ‘Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”? So they are no longer two but one flesh. ‘What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.’” They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?’ He said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.’ The disciples said to him, ‘If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.’ But he said to them, ‘Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.’”

Again, the background for this passage seems to be the current debate between the disciples of Hillel and those that followed Shammai as discussed above. This debate is clearly seen in the question that Jesus is asked: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” They are drawing him into the disagreement by asking His view as an attempt to trap him between the popular view of the people (Hillel) and the conservative view of the religious establishment (Shammai). Jesus begins with an appeal to God’s original intention in marriage. Jesus is much more concerned about esteeming and preserving marriage than about the causes that allow for divorce. We can rush past his opening statements but they sound like a clarion call in our culture.

He states with unashamed conviction that marriage is between a male and female. In this simple statement, He overturns the Old Testament practice of polygamy. A man and a woman, singular, was the original intention. At the same time, He declares that the divine intention in marriage is heterosexual. God does not consider a homosexual union a marriage. In addition, He affirms that marriage is supposed to be for life. No man should separate the covenant of marriage since God is involved in the forming of the covenant. We should not be preoccupied with how to separate but with how to preserve “one flesh”. Working against marriage is working against God as He is the one who joins them. The implication is that divorce should not happen.

The pharisees get the message loud and clear as is evident by their next question. They ask why does Moses command divorce then? This question is significant because Jesus is being directly asked whether Deuteronomy allows for divorce and under what causes. They are claiming Deuteronomy endorses and validates divorce. They are suggesting that Jesus is contradicting Moses.

Jesus states that Moses did not endorse divorce but gave an allowance because of the sinfulness of their hearts. The switch in verbs is remarkable. The pharisees state that Moses “commands” a divorce Jesus states divorce was “permitted.” This statement in Deuteronomy was an allowance not a validation.

The reason for the allowance is because of the “hardness of heart.” This phrase means a stubborn refusal to submit to God’s plan. It was used of the Children of Israel during their wandering in the wilderness. They refused to go into the promised land and remained in the desert because they doubted the power of God to give them success. The problem was with the heart. If we could be given a new heart, then the allowance is no longer necessary. Indeed, this is what Jesus came to accomplish.

Jesus elucidates that Moses’ certificate of divorce was a departure from the creation ordinance. That state of affairs was “not so” from the beginning. His statement is reinforced by His earlier command to “let not man separate”. God in the beginning joined, man in his stubborn heart separated.

As in Matthew 5, the only legitimate exception that Jesus mentions is divorce for adultery. In turn, the disciples are shocked by the severity of the command. Their conclusion is that it is better not to marry. Jesus response is that the priority of the Kingdom of Heaven should guide us in making decisions about these things. If the demand of the Kingdom means it is better for us to stay single, then so we should.

MARK 10:1-12 AND LUKE 16:18

”And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ He answered them, ‘What did Moses command ! you?’ They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, “God made them male and female.” “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.’ And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. And he said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’”

“Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

We will take the final two statements of Jesus on this subject together as they are similar in message. These passages cover much of the same ground as the above passages with the following clarification and addition. Jesus clearly states that remarriage without a valid cause for the previous divorce constitutes adultery. While the divorce may be granted in a human court, the covenant is not broken before God. The original marriage is still recognized in some sense. Hence, remarriage is adultery. Adultery as an exception is not endorsed or denied. It is simply not addressed. Although, harmonizing with Jesus’ other statements would indicate that remarriage after adultery would be the only exception mentioned by Him.

1 CORINTHIANS 7:6-40

Paul deals with another set of questions regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage that are not directly addressed in Jesus’ teaching. How does the new birth affect our marriage or freedom to marry? We come in forgiven (1 Corinthians 6:9-11) and changed. We are no longer what we were but are in fact new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). Since

the old has gone and all has been made new, what does this mean for our marriages? Does this new, higher life have anything to do with marriage? In addition, times in Corinth were difficult and many were awaiting the return of Christ to save them from the current challenges. Should we even be concerned with such earthly things as marriage since we are a spiritual, heavenly people?

Many different thoughts were being tossed around, so Paul, by the wisdom of God, brings his apostolic counsel. He is not so much laying down a theology of marriage but, with pastoral concern, is applying the truth to people's lives. Paul proceeds with a general principle that he works out in application repeatedly in regards to various groups of people: it is best to remain in one's current state upon being born again.

It is debated whether this counsel reflects a universal principle for all Christians or whether it is Paul's advice based on the severe pressures the Corinthians were facing. Many believe that verses 17-24 reflect the fact that this counsel is Paul's recommendation to all:

“Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches...Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called...So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.”

However, others see in verse 26 a clarification that Paul's encouragement is determined by the present circumstances: “I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is.” While our conclusion to this debate may strongly affect the value we place on remaining single or choosing to marry, it does not have as much influence on the conditions for divorce and remarriage elucidated by Paul in this passage. Therefore, we will explore this passage primarily seeking to understand the implications of his teaching for the possibilities of divorce and remarriage.

We will look at Paul's instruction by grouping the verses according the category of people being addressed:

TO THE UNMARRIED:

“Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

Paul applies the above principle first to the unmarried. Such a term would include all the single, divorced and widowed upon entering the Kingdom of God. Paul believes it is advantageous that they stay single and focus on the Kingdom of God. However, he does commend marriage to those who find remaining single too difficult. Presumably, as stated in other places, if a single person does choose to marry, he/she must only marry another Christian.

TO THE MARRIED IN THE LORD:

“To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.”

Paul addresses the married by referring back to the Lord's command to not divorce and applies that as a current command to all Christians. Those who come into Christ as married are to remain married. The new life does not allow them a new marriage to someone else but rather renews their current marriage. If two Christians marry after

conversion, this verse would equally apply to them. They are to remain married and not divorce.

Paul goes on to give instruction relating to the case of “if she does.” This exceptive clause is not a validation of the separation or divorce akin to divorce for adultery. In other words, he is not lessening the demand of Christ by allowing them to divorce even though they should not. Rather, he is simply stating what should happen if such separation occurs.

Despite his instruction to remain married, he knows some may not choose or feel able to keep it. In such cases, separation must be seen as temporary and reconciliation must always be the goal. Remarriage to another is not allowed. Paul introduces a state where a divorce may be tolerated in the church but remarriage is clearly not allowed.

Paul does not list adultery as an exception in this passage. But, as he is clearly referring to Jesus’ teaching on the issue, that would presumably be understood. The omission makes further sense if we remember that Paul is not directly addressing reasons for divorce but how Christians should proceed in their new life in Christ.

TO THE MIXED MARRIAGE:

"To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"

The switch in person from the Lord to Paul should not be understood as making these statements less inspired. He clearly expected his counsel to be followed as apostolic instruction. Paul is merely clarifying that he is switching from a subject that the Lord explicitly addressed to one that He did not. Jesus did not comment on the unique situation of one spouse becoming a Christian and the other remaining an unbeliever. Paul is now giving counsel based on his apostolic commission and care as well as his understanding of the rest of Scripture.

Those who find themselves in mixed marriages should remain in them as long as the unbelieving spouse is content to remain in the relationship. The believer should take no initiative in ending the marriage. In fact, in light of the rest of Scripture, they should live in such a way that their behavior may convince their unbelieving spouse of the reality of the gospel (1 Pet. 3:1-2).

The reason for this command to stay together is that the covenant of marriage remains valid even after conversion. The unbeliever does not corrupt the marriage with his or her lack of faith. Instead, the faith of the believer invites the blessing of God and makes the union and its children holy. Grace is stronger than sin. The sacredness of the original marriage is affirmed even after such a life altering transformation as conversion.

Paul’s counsel is directed to the believer, but he also takes into account the will of the unbeliever. If the unbelieving spouse is not pleased to remain in the marriage and decides to divorce, the believing spouse should let it happen. This is the opposite of the counsel Paul has just given to two believing spouses in the previous verses. There, Paul commands them to “not separate” and “be reconciled”. Here, his injunctions are to “let it” happen and you are “not enslaved” or bound. This is a marked difference. Paul’s reason for letting it happen is that the believer has no way of knowing if his/her influence would ever cause the unbelieving spouse to change.

While divorce is certainly permitted in this situation, granted that it is only initiated by the unbelieving spouse,

the question remains whether the believing spouse is free to remarry. The answer to this question depends on our understanding of the phrase “not enslaved” or “not bound” (NIV). Does this only mean that the believer is not bound or enslaved to their covenant responsibilities toward the unbelieving spouse (i.e. they are free to be separated but not necessarily free to remarry)? Or does it refer to the marriage itself (i.e., they are not bound by the covenant and can therefore remarry)?

The main arguments for separation only, without freedom to remarry, are as follows. First, the force of the phrase used (not enslaved) could be satisfied by a separation and would not require a divorce. Second, the issue of divorce and remarriage is so weighty that we should expect to have a clearer statement from Paul to warrant our allowing remarriage after divorce for any other reason than adultery. Third, if Paul is adding another allowance for divorce and remarriage, is this not a double standard? He just told two believing spouses that they may not remarry after separation. Is the nature of the marriage bond changed just because one spouse is unbelieving? There has been no adultery so the covenant must remain.

Now, we turn to the main arguments for the separation being a valid divorce allowing for remarriage. First, if all Paul had in mind was the same type of separation as verse 11, we should expect him to say the same thing. Instead, we have a striking difference in his instructions. In fact, this instruction seems in direct contrast to his counsel to two believing spouses. Second, Paul uses similar phrasing in this passage as he does for the valid dissolution of the marriage covenant in v. 39 (A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives). Third, Paul is not using a double-standard but referring to different circumstances resulting in different instructions. Fourth, the phrase “not under bondage” is the exact wording in ancient divorce contracts allowing for freedom to remarry and would have been understood that way.

It seems to us that the weight of the argument leans to the conclusion that Paul’s statement is in reference to a valid form of divorce allowing for freedom to remarry. Such a conclusion would be consistent with Old Testament teaching as well. Along with adultery, the Law and Jewish tradition allowed for one other cause of valid divorce: abandonment. Exodus 21:10-11 protected certain wives and allowed for divorce if their husbands did not give them physical affection and material provision. Effectually, such husbands broke the covenantal commitment to leave and cleave by their neglect of their responsibilities. This was not a minor or momentary failure but complete abandonment. Such wives were allowed to remarry.

Paul would have known of this Old Testament passage and the common Jewish practice of considering abandonment a valid divorce allowing for remarriage. The Exodus passage probably stood behind Paul’s command that husbands cherish (affection) and nourish (provision) their wives. Such a complete violation of covenantal vows by an unbelieving spouse leaving a believing spouse, as mentioned above, would be tantamount to abandonment. There would be no real basis of appeal to the unbelieving spouse to bring him or her to repentance, or any firm hope for future salvation. Therefore, our current position is that a believing spouse, abandoned by an unbeliever, would be free to remarry in the Lord.

TO THE WIDOWED:

”A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.”

In this passage, Paul’s instructions are simple and straightforward. The covenant of marriage only lasts until death. If a spouse is widowed, he or she is always free to remarry. However, Paul would prefer they stay in their current state, single, as he is.

SUMMARY OF TEACHINGS ON DIVORCE:

To summarize what has been covered so far, the Bible clearly teaches the following about divorce and remarriage:

1. Divorce is valid but not necessary for adultery (violation of one flesh). If divorce for adultery occurs, the harmed spouse is free to remarry.
2. Divorce is valid for abandonment by an unbeliever (violation of leave and cleave). The believer is allowed to remarry.
3. Divorce may not be initiated by a believer for any other reason than adultery.
4. If a divorce occurs that is not the result of adultery or abandonment by an unbeliever, it is against the command of Scripture, but may be tolerated. However, the covenant remains in place and remarriage is not allowed. The spouses must remain single or be reconciled.

POSSIBLE EXTENSIONS OF VALID DIVORCE:

This raises the question, “Are there any other grounds for valid divorce that allow for remarriage?” If we have to quote chapter and verse to prove additional grounds, then the simple answer is no. However, if we understand the teachings of Scripture as general principles and follow Paul’s example of applying those principles to specific situations, there may be some. Indeed, this is often how Jesus responded to the Pharisees who quoted the letter of the Law to Him. He found the heart principle behind the command of the Scripture and applied it in current circumstances. However, we must approach such extensions with caution. It is easy to read our own justifications into the principles of the Bible.

We will only cover two possible extensions of the Scriptural principles of divorce that may carry with them the freedom to remarry. One situation not mentioned in Scripture is the case of abuse. Abuse is a term used for a wide range of actions in our day and can be somewhat vague. Some people even refer to Biblical teachings on roles and servanthood as abuse. By the term abuse, we mean that which poses a real danger and harm to another. Let us state clearly that if any spouse or child is in physical danger, the first priority is for them to find safety. Separation may be necessary in the immediate, even if reconciliation is the long-term goal. The Church should not be guilty of using a legalistic interpretation of marriage to keep someone in harm’s way.

If someone is unrepentant of their abusive patterns or staying in the marriage poses imminent danger to the spouse or children, then separation or divorce seems a necessary and appropriate response. Surely, such abuse is a complete breaking of the marital vow to cleave, nurture and cherish and may be equivalent, in principle, to abandonment.

When such a marriage ends in divorce, is there freedom to remarry? We must admit that our conclusion can not be certain. If we understand abuse to be equal to the type of abandonment by an unbeliever mentioned by Paul and the Old Testament (see above), then the divorce would be valid in the sense that freedom to remarry is given. However, if abuse is not considered on par with abandonment, then the divorce may be necessary for the protection of the spouse and children, but the covenant deemed to remain in place. In which case, the spouse should remain unmarried or, if repentance is worked out, reconcile. This decision should be left to the faith and conscience of those involved.

The other possible extension we want to raise is that of abandonment by so-called believers. One of the situations we face that Paul did not is the amount of people who take the label Christian but do not live the life. This becomes important because Paul commands a different response from the spouse who has been divorced by a believer than by one who has been divorced by an unbeliever.

It is possible that a person calling themselves a Christian could show such perseverance in willful sin, such disregard for the demands of Christ on their lives and such resistance to the assistance and discipline of the church in restoring

the marriage that their actions may be considered equivalent to an abandonment of the Christian faith. In such circumstances, reconciliation is deemed impossible apart from a work of the Spirit equivalent to the new birth. In this case, the teaching of Paul on mixed marriages may apply. Such a divorce would effectually be abandonment by an unbeliever. In that case, the divorced spouse would be free to remarry.

Unfortunately, life is not always that clear. Someone may walk away from God for a season while retaining their salvation and return to the Christian life years later. Part of working out his/her repentance could involve reconciliation to the spouse he/she left. The divorced spouse in such a situation would be instructed by Paul to reconcile or remain single. Again, these situations are not always self-evident and would have to be determined by time and fruit as well as the faith and the conscience of the apostle, elders and individuals involved.

The above situations may describe two extensions of valid divorce that are allowed in principle by Scripture. However, any true exceptions dare not become excuses to escape a difficult relationship. Rather, they only occur when one partner ruptures the marriage covenant against the non-offending party's best efforts to preserve the marriage. Such cases may result in the freedom to divorce, but it remains unclear whether they carry with them the equal liberty to remarry.

Any other possible extensions of divorce and remarriage would have to be worked out with a submissive heart and in response to the perceived direction of the Holy Spirit. The faith and conscience of the apostle, elders and individuals involved would lead the way.

In certain cases not directly addressed in Scripture, it may be that a team of elders find no peace in their hearts that the situation under consideration represents a true extension of the principles of Scripture regarding divorce and remarriage. In such circumstances, they may find themselves under heavy pressure from the people involved as well as others in the church. However, every elder should know the freedom to be true to his convictions of the Word of God despite the pressure of the culture around him, the faith of the individuals concerned or even his own sense of care for the people involved. The same may be true, if a group of elders have faith for a couple to remarry in debatable circumstances. Each elder should know the freedom to work with his faith and the faith of the couple in establishing the marriage in Christ. All such situations should be worked out in concert with apostolic counsel.

On the other hand, a team of elders may find themselves in the awkward position where one elder has faith for a valid divorce or remarriage where another does not. The first appeal, in such circumstances, would be for apostolic involvement to help determine the way forward. Apostolic authority was often used in the New Testament Church to bring unity into situations just like this. However, at times, a clear decision may still be unattainable and any way forward debatable. It is possible that in such cases each elder would be free to follow his own conscience with a teachable heart and humble attitude.

Before concluding, it is necessary to touch on the issue of receiving couples into the church who have married under questionable circumstances, possibly even against the counsel of elders and the teaching of Scripture. What if an individual or couple who have been counseled not to remarry leave the church and come back to it married? What if the spouse of an invalid divorce has already remarried? What if a couple has remarried with the faith of one elder but not another? In all these situations and more, how do we receive a couple who has already married or remarried?

No matter how unclear the case for marriage or remarriage may have been previously, once a couple have married, they are clearly married. In such circumstances, receiving such a couple into the life of the church may involve their first working through issues of repentance with other spouses, elders, churches, etc. However, due to our understanding of the grace of God in the sacrifice of Christ, where there is genuine repentance, their past sins would no longer be held against them or their marriage. Their current marriage is a true and valid marriage. They should be received and cared for by all in the same manner as any other married couple.

In conclusion, there are only three crystal clear cases that allow for remarriage once the covenant of marriage has been broken. They are as follows:

1. Certain physical adultery
2. Abandonment by an unbeliever
3. Death of one of the spouses.

In other cases, divorce may be accepted, but remarriage is not certain. All of these cases must be decided by the faith and conscience of the couple and the elder(s) involved under the guidance of apostolic wisdom.

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